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THE CHURCH OF THE LIVING GOD.

A SERMON

PREACHED

ON THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT, .

IN ST. PETER'S CHURCH, COBOURG,

BY

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A SERMON.

1 TIMOTHY, iii., 15.—“The Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.”

There is a close connection, my brethren, between the Collects appointed for the first three Sundays in Advent; and it was no doubt intended that, in substance and purpose, they should have this bearing one upon the other.

We have, first, the announcement of Christ's coming; of His coming in the flesh, and His coming to judgment. This points, as we may say, to the beginning and the end of our destiny as Christians,—that heaven is our allotted inheritance, and Jesus the way to obtain it.

But this was a great truth not to be thrown rashly, and only incidentally, upon the world; it was not to be a revelation dependent merely upon traditionary recollections. A truth so important and momentous must be treasured up in the *written word*; it must be distinct and clear amongst the recorded doctrines of the Bible. So, then, we have a Sunday in Advent specially for the Holy Scriptures,—for the divine and abiding testimony to that great truth of the Lord's two-fold Advent; the truth which moulds our present, and regulates our future; which states the foundation of our hopes, and the ground of our fears; which proclaims our immortality, and tells how it may be rendered a blessed and a happy one.

But this holy Volume, this precious Word of God, was not to be flung, as it were, upon the waters, to float, as it might, down the stream of time, without any provision to preserve its integrity, and guard it from mutilation. There must be a "witness and keeper of Holy Writ;" and, as our twentieth article expresses it, the Church is constituted for that office. What is known, and what is taught of our blessed Lord, is contained in the Holy Scriptures; but the Church is, under God, the guardian and proclaimer of those truths. Her ministers and ambassadors are taught to urge them; and they are to dispense the ordinances by which believers are to be kept in visible union with Christ their Head. Our third Sunday in Advent, therefore, specially takes up the office of the ministry; and, in so doing, points specially to the organization of the Church, and its claim, as a divine appointment, upon the veneration, love, and obedience of all true believers.

When it is said, in the Acts of the Apostles, that "the Lord added unto the church daily such as should be saved;" when, as in the text, it is called "the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth,"—it is evident that it was our Lord's intention to organize and establish an institution which should comprise, as in a household, all his believing people; which should hold, and maintain, and teach the doctrines by which they were to be guided. In giving this a name, He gave it distinctiveness: he showed that the church was not to be an abstraction, but something visible and material; a society arranged and settled by laws and rules,—with such an organization as would ensure its perpetuity. When such laws and rules can, as in this case, be referred to a Divine head, we have a security that they will be firmly maintained; whereas if we let go this sanction, there could be no certainty about it, and the Church would partake of as many aspects as there are varieties in human opinion.

There will always be differences of construction and interpretation upon what is revealed; yet, although there are occasional instances of eccentricity or impulsiveness, which will throw men out of a rational judgment upon such things, there are points on which the great majority of sober and careful inquirers will always agree. So it is the conviction of a vast majority of professed Christians, that a Church, in its outline, constitution, and distinctive visible features, has been organized or sanctioned by our Lord; and the same feeling will generally cause them to admit and appreciate what, under the name of the Church, is constructed and governed according to our Lord's will.

Examining the New Testament, and comparing with it the early Christian writers, we cannot fail to discover that there was originally,—and that there was for several centuries maintained,—a oneness of aspect, faith, and organization in the Church; every where there was one obvious and recognized frame-work of that holy society. Except in a few cases, which were always strongly condemned by the general voice of believers, there was no such thing as departure or deviation from the rules, and government, and order which then characterized “the Church of the living God.”

It is very evident that the believers on the name of Christ were not to stand isolated and separate, each to pursue his own way and will; but they must be part and parcel of that organized association. Their admission into this society, by the Lord's appointed way, was to be the test of their union with Him. It was the established means,—and, as far as we know, the only means,—by which they were to obtain the privileges and benefits conferred by His death.

Some, we are aware, will argue differently; and very frequently their repugnance to joining such an institution arises from the dislike of restraint,—they have an aversion to be trammelled and fettered by rules. They may fancy, too, that by avoiding the positive profession which union

with the Church implies, they keep themselves free from responsibility, and will escape the punishment of broken vows and engagements.

But it requires very few words to shew, how erroneous and how dangerous such a sentiment is. At best, in avoiding such profession, men class themselves with heathens and unbelievers; they put themselves upon a level with that large portion of mankind, which have never heard of a Saviour. And if this be a safe condition, then Christ must have died in vain; it would be useless, in that case, to preach the Gospel, or to try to convert the infidel and idolater. But if they would shrink from such a sentiment as this, and admit that out of Christ there is no salvation, they must avail themselves of it by the appointed means. The promise and profession, however weighty and solemn, must be made and kept up, if they would obtain pardon of their sins, and be received at last into God's kingdom of glory.

This being the case, it should, my brethren, be a matter of deep concern and anxious inquiry with us, whether the spiritual society in which *we* are enrolled, is really the one which can be traced out, and proved, to have been constituted by our Lord in the beginning. This we confess to be a delicate inquiry. The Christian world is much split up into sects and parties; and each of these would claim to be right. Divisions of this sort, in the face of scriptural precept and Apostolic practice, we must confess to be unfortunate, hard as it may have been in some cases to avoid them; and possibly a sort of justification is pleaded by such sects and parties, because our own Church of England is accused of having herself the aspect of a sect or divided part of Christianity, inasmuch as, at the Reformation, she departed from what was then recognized as the universal Catholic Church.

But let us try to fix the truth of this matter in our understandings, and graft it amongst our unalterable principles.

The Church in our mother-country was planted there, if not by Apostles themselves, certainly by those who were taught by and conversed with Apostles. We have the most ample testimony to that effect; as well as evidence of the fact that the Church of Christ, both in Britain and Ireland, was an independent Church. It certainly had no connection, and scarcely any intercourse, with the Church of Rome for about five centuries from its first formation. Its sympathies and associations did not lie in that direction at all; and there is proof, from certain marked peculiarities in religious worship and usages, that the Britons derived their first ministers, and their first knowledge of Christianity, from the Eastern Christians. When, at the end of the sixth century, Gregory, bishop of Rome, sent over the celebrated missionary, Augustine, into Britain, the latter found a Church there, struggling, it is true, with many difficulties, but still a vigorous and independent church. Its Bishops affirmed distinctly that they owed no subjection to Rome; that they had a metropolitan amongst themselves; and that they were determined to adhere to those rules and usages which had prevailed amongst them from the beginning.

And the whole Church of our mother-country continued in this state of independence and purity for about five centuries more; when the universal dominion acquired in those dark ages by the Church of Rome, extended to the Churches of our parent countries also. They, like others, came under that despotism for a time; and like others, they admitted its corrupt doctrines and superstitious practices. Not, however, without much conflict and a frequent resistance. That yoke always sat heavily upon the British people; they were always restive under that usurped dominion. If, indeed, the chains of that spiritual despotism had been firmly riveted, and there had been a universal and cordial acceptance of those corrupt tenets, the Reformation in England in the sixteenth century would not have been so easy and general a thing as it proved to be.

And here let us consider fairly what a Reformation means. Surely not a thorough and complete demolition of the whole fabric, but the purification and correction of abuses. The Church, though corrupted and defiled, was still a scriptural and apostolic institution. Errors and superstitions could not destroy its form or model; they could not touch the strong rock of its foundation. Our Reformers, then, did what duty and wisdom prompted. They cleared away that rubbish of superstition; they removed those incrustations of error and defilement; and they restored to a gladdened people the primitive holiness, as well as completeness, of the Church of the living God. The Bishops of our communion, roused up from the trance and thralldom of a long night of error, stripped off their Episcopal robes,—not to trample them under their feet, and reject them as unlawful things; but they washed and made clean those garments—which had come down in legitimate course, as the mantle from Elijah to Elisha—and stood again, in their original and undefiled vestments, before the altar of their God.

In this way, my brethren, we came back again to the order, and fellowship, and doctrine of the Apostles. The change from the soundness of their principles had been violently and unauthorizedly made by the ambitious and despotic; and the whole nation, as soon as possible,—as soon as a right and lawful direction was given to their efforts,—repudiated that change, and brought the Church back again to its original condition; to what it was, at its first planting in the land by Apostolic hands.

We ought, then, to consider it a great privilege and a great blessing to belong to this, the primitive Church of our mother country,—this real and truthful branch of the first planted “Church of the living God.” Many good and pious men and women, who, from early and traditionary instruction, had been led off from it, have come back to it again, after

they have viewed it in this light. Many, indeed, who had been exercising their ministry under various forms of irregularity and schism, have thrown up what they were convinced was an unauthorized commission, and have become dispensers of God's Word and Sacraments in what, by hereditary claim and title, is proved to be a sound and veritable branch of the primitive Church of Christ.

People are prone to lay great stress upon hereditary descent from exalted and illustrious ancestors, and to pride themselves upon the antiquity and nobleness of their origin. This is an excusable pride, if it lead to an emulation of those who have made their name great.

But no such mere earthly distinction is equal to the honour of belonging to that great spiritual family which was organized by our Lord and Apostles; and which, through ages and generations,—often in the fiery furnace, and often in the deep waters,—has come down, widening and strengthening, to our own time; its name, its laws, its symbols, its high intents, all unchanged. Baronial castles, stately halls, gorgeous palaces, are as nothing in comparison with this,—“the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.” The best decked and most luxurious banquets upon earth are insignificant, when set side by side with the feast of feasts which the Lord hath provided for his own household in commemoration of His body broken, and His blood shed for us.

But though it be a great privilege to belong thus to Christ's family, and a great duty to adhere to it, we must beware of the folly and sin of disparaging those who are less favourably circumstanced. It is oftentimes their misfortune rather than their fault; and piety, zeal, and conscientiousness are to be honoured, even if they are exercised in irregular and mistaken courses. Still, respect for them, and love for them, should not hinder the desire of seeing them as we

are,—one with us; and all, one with Christ. It is an admitted and a high duty to convert to Christianity those who are strangers to it; who are groping in heathen darkness; and who do not know the way of reconciliation to God. And if so, it is a duty, as far as in us lies, to keep the Church one; to maintain its unity and integrity; to preserve it in its original identity and communion with its divine head. This we may and should do with the weapons of love, with the arguments of Christian persuasion,—without reviling, without unkind and uncharitable imputations.

This maintenance of unity in the Church we should feel to be a duty; though many will affirm it to be a matter of indifference, so long as truth of doctrine is preserved. But we are not authorised to draw any such distinction; we have no right to pronounce any thing unessential which our Lord has appointed or sanctioned. There are no “little things” connected with the organization of the Church of the living God. We should not dare to change the waters in Baptism, nor the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper, for any other substance: these are in themselves small matters, but their appointment by Christ gives to their use a perpetual and unchangeable authority. Just so in regard to the continuity of the government of the Church, and its rules of order and worship,—we must adhere to what we find laid down in the Lord’s words, and established by the testimony of His immediate followers.

Religion itself is very much endangered by looseness and indifference upon this point,—if men have no allegiance, no tie to the Church of the living God beyond taste, or habit, or inclination; if they can be “blown about by every wind of doctrine;” if they can be driven hither and thither by the mere charm of oratory, or the force of declamation. Such laxity and indifference would be attended with fearful consequences, if admitted into the practice of ordinary life.

If, upon such pretences, the government of a country could be altered, and new laws and authorities set up at pleasure in its room, how lamentable would be the result? If the relation of husband and wife could, on such grounds, be severed, what terrible calamities would ensue? These are very analogous cases; and we could not, without inconsistency, draw a line between them.

We have, in fact, positive proofs before our eyes every day of the evils and misfortunes which contempt of this great principle of the Divine organization of the Church brings about. It leads a large body of men into actual infidelity; because, they argue, a Divine institution could hardly present so many contradictions, so much division, so much strife. Again, when Christians are mainly intent upon their divisions; when rival bodies are engaged in watching each other; while they are seeking and striving how they may best guard their separate interests against the encroachments of others; little time is left, and little inclination, for the cultivation of practical religion. The contest, therefore, is no longer one with acknowledged and common adversaries, but a strife between Christian bodies. It is not how the common enemy of the faith may be subdued, but how an ambitious and encroaching Christian rival may be put down. It is not how the Lord's kingdom may be advanced, but how a religious sect or party may be built up.

Such dissensions, my brethren, are in every point of view most sad; and it is a blessed thing that we have a refuge from them in that which we can safely and truthfully call the Church of the Apostles, the Church of the living God. It was, no doubt, in foresight of their mischievous effects, that St. Paul said, "Mark them which cause divisions among you, and avoid them;" and that a greater than St. Paul, even our Lord Jesus Christ, prayed that His followers might be "all one."

Let it, then, be our supplication and our effort, that the "multitude of them that believe may be of one heart and one soul;" that we may all, however scattered and estranged, be one household in Christ, having the same care one for another, and minding the same thing; that so, being at peace and united, the "Church may be edified," and its members "grow together a holy temple in the Lord."